



American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

PLEA
FOR THE
MONTHLY CONCERT.

A SERMON BY REV. A. L. STONE, D. D.



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THE following discourse, preached in Park Street Church, Boston, on the first Sabbath in April last, and kindly furnished for publication, at the request of one of the Secretaries of the Board, who heard it, presents a "plea for the monthly concert," which may well profit many outside of the congregation to which it was addressed.

Acts, xiv. 27.—"*And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that the Lord had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.*"

FOR graphic and even romantic interest there is no other book of the Bible that surpasses this book of the *Acts of the Apostles*. As its name indicates, it is a book of action. You are led by it along a story of marvellous adventures. There is not one dull chapter. Every page is stirring and eventful. Neither history nor fiction ever traced a chronicle more crowded with strange and thrilling scenes. And the line of adventure is not, either in its inspiration or its consequences, frivolous and transient. The scheme that marshalled the journeyings and the sufferings of these heroic actors was nothing less than to "open the door of faith" to nations ignorant of Christ and his salvation. What a lyric and picturesque touch of the pen of Luke in this expression—"opening the door of Faith." A door of light upon deep darkness,—a door of deliverance for the bondmen of superstition and idolatry,—a door beneath whose grand arch, and through whose stately portals, the long bright procession of the Christian virtues should enter in and possess the realms of barbarism, degradation and cruelty. Perhaps it will be popularly, though it cannot be to Christian hearts, a less taking version if we say it is a record of missionary labors, missionary trials, and missionary successes. It is the first volume of the long work of the Church in obedience to that command, at once so full of the love and the authority of Jesus, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature."

In the scene outlined in our text, we are introduced into a missionary meeting, whose special purpose is the communication of missionary intelligence. To the disciples at Antioch belongs the honor of the first mission ever sent forth by a Christian church. Moved by the Holy Ghost, with fasting and prayer, and the laying on of hands, they had set apart Barnabas and Saul to the missionary work.

(You read concerning this inauguration service at the beginning of the present chapter.) From such "Farewell" these two intrepid brethren had gone forth from city to city, with various fortune, through perils and sufferings, with ever increasing boldness, preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus, and salvation through him. At length, after persecutions and stonings, rejected of the Jews but with great and good success among the Gentiles, they had completed their tour, and now stood again among their brethren at Antioch. The whole church came together to hear these returned missionaries. There was no need of urging an attendance upon that meeting. None said, "It is only a missionary meeting, it will be dull and tame." There were no attractions within all the city that could divert a disciple from the scene where these missionary laborers were to tell their simple story. Their hearts were bound up in hearing how it had fared with those whom they had sent out to preach the new Gospel, and how that Gospel was winning its way in the earth. No strains of music, whether sacred or profane; no lips of eloquent orators, charming never so wisely; no scenes bright and pleasant with social festivities, could compete with the interest of that rehearsal which was to tell how a Christian mission had prospered. They had not prayed and fasted, and commissioned their brethren to this work, to be indifferent to its record, and turn carelessly away from the story of its progress, its difficulties and its triumphs.

In nearly all the elements of interest attached to this occasion of long ago, and in some additional elements of a grander scope and deeper power, we have this scene repeated in our own times every month, in that "CONCERT OF PRAYER," now so widely observed by the modern Christian church. Eighty years ago last June, the observance of this Concert began with an association of Baptist ministers, of Nottingham, England. Forty years earlier an attempt had been made, by a number of Scotch ministers, to secure more united and concerted prayer for a general effusion of the Holy Spirit "on all the churches of the Redeemer and on the whole habitable earth." The Saturday afternoon and Sabbath morning of each week, and more solemnly the first Tuesday of each quarter of the year, were specially commended to Christians for such seasons of agreeing intercession. Many pious hearts in Great Britain, and some on this side the ocean, caught the flame of this quickening influence, and "praying societies" were gathered and maintained in various places, in both countries. The sacred fire touched the heart of our own Jonathan Edwards, who was moved to write an elaborate essay, entitled "An humble attempt to promote explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth." These efforts and influences culminated at length in the adoption of a Resolution by the Nottingham Association, in 1784, "recommending the setting apart of the first Monday evening in every month for prayer for the extension of the Gospel." The circle of churches acting upon this suggestion widened, though somewhat slowly, every year. A few American churches, it is believed, kept alive the old Quarterly Concert from its institution, before the middle of the last century. A few more began the observance of the Monthly Concert at about the time of the sailing of the first missionaries of the "American Board." But the observance of this Concert did not gain very general prevalence until the year 1815, when it was urged and enforced by the Panoplist, and almost immediately welcomed by large and increasing numbers of local churches. After some twenty years it was found that not a few pastors and churches, from the difficulty of gathering a full attendance upon Monday evening, had transferred the Concert to the first Sabbath evening of the month. Several missionary and ecclesiastical bodies favored this change, the subject was discussed at the meeting of the American Board in

1838, and though no action was taken, it would appear that this change had been widely though not universally approved.

With such a past, this sacred season has come down to us. Its observance, maintenance and transmission are now in our hands. It is no longer a novelty; neither is the Sabbath, nor Christianity itself; but none the less for that ought our interest in it to be fresh, lively and tender. Our fathers and mothers loved it and honored it. They would as soon have turned their backs on the Lord's day and the sacramental supper, as on this hour of prayer for the conversion of the world. The first Sabbath of each month was with many of them the communion Sabbath. Most appropriately they came from the table of their Lord to pray that the memorials of His love and death might be set before all the perishing. In their Sacramental Hymn these two verses came always together.

" 'Twas the same love that spread the feast,
That gently drew us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.

" Pity the nations, O our God!
Constrain the earth to come;
Send thy victorious word abroad,
And bring the strangers home."

There is some reason to fear, that with the present new generation of Christian believers, this Concert has less interest and sacredness than with the generation retiring. They felt that it was as divine as the very institution of missions; that the church *at home*, could not otherwise obey the command to go forth preaching the word to the ends of the earth; and that it were treachery to the Lord, and to those whom they had sent forth in their name to disciple all nations, to lay upon them such a commission, and send forth with them no volume of united, agreeing prayer. They had too faithful a spirit, too tender a conscience toward this observance, to allow in them the omission of any possible respect to its most honored keeping. We wear the bands of fealty to this venerable ordinance more loosely and lightly. With us it is only one of a great many ways of spending the evening of the Sabbath, between which one and any of all the rest we are free to choose, as convenience, ease and personal inclination may dictate. The Sabbath evening has come to have a thronging pressure upon it, such as our fathers never dreamed of. It is our evening for sacred operas,—I mean concerts,—for oratorios, for paid declamation, for every department of humane and moral enterprise, for the recitation of perilous adventures in our modern land of bondage, for inaugurating new police regulations in the metropolis, for well nigh every cause that can find an advocate, hire a hall, and that wishes for an audience. These manifold channels, with others less questionable than some of these, sluice off the attendance upon the venerable concert of prayer, and leave it sometimes stranded dry and high, like an abandoned hulk on the shore.

Such a depletion and desertion of this meeting is a great loss to the cause of missions, a great subtraction from the power and faithfulness of the church in this main artery of Christian life and labor, a blast and a blight upon the intelligent and principled piety of the youth of our communions, and a sad omen for the type of piety that shall hold the ascendancy with us in coming days.

Let me now take some one of you by the hand, whom I see here this morning, but never see on the concert evening, and set before you the persuasive claims of this Monthly Concert of Prayer.

Consider, First, its contribution to your intellectual culture, and to the amount of your positive knowledge. Missionary explorations have now been pushed out over the four quarters of the globe. They have traversed the length and breadth of the continents. They have searched the sea for hidden islands. They have made the acquaintance of every barbarous people. They have occupied the seats of ancient civilization. Toward the poles, they have gone as far into arctic and antarctic winters as the most dauntless navigators. Under the Equator, they have braved the heat of tropic suns. The men who have conducted these Christian marches have been men of good ability, of studious habits, and of disciplined mind. Most of them have been graduates of our colleges, and not a few of them men of the highest promise in scientific tastes, literary accomplishments and intellectual force. These men have gone out into these varied regions of the earth with their eyes open and their minds alert to observe, and record all that came within their field of vision. They have told us of the novel aspects of these strange shores. They have opened to us the interior of these mighty continents. They have mapped out these island groups. They take us up picturesque valleys, and over rocky ridges, and across nameless rivers, and pause with us on the margin of inland lakes, veiled hitherto from all but native sight, and climb with us the dome of volcanic mountains, until we see with them all that their eyes have gazed upon. They tell us the growths of the field and the forest, what the hand of nature rears and what the hand of tillage. They paint the portraits of the races dwelling in these far off scenes, introduce us to their houses, their social life, their temples of worship, their religious rites, their traits of character, their governments, their manners and customs. They are not flying tourists, skinning over the soil as by express, and sketching only what they see by daylight from the windows of a lightning train. They go into these new climes to dwell there. They make themselves at home among the people. They observe deliberately, and by many a verification, all concerning which they testify. They have the deepest practical interest in studying the hearts and lives of these strange races, and they are men whose testimony can be taken as the witness of truth and honesty. The rehearsal of these testimonies, from beneath the face of the whole heaven, must needs bring together a vast amount of the most wonderful and the most reliable contributions to human knowledge which our enlightened age can boast. It is knowledge not merely of the dead past, but of the living present. On parallel lines with our life at home, all these distant nations and tribes are moving forward in their own current, daily histories. And every month at least, we may look over, eastward and westward, into these contrasted courses of human progress, and keep a calendar of the whole drift of the race. There is no periodical that comes upon the table of the savor that contains within the same space a juster, wider, more varied view of man, as a mortal and an immortal being—his condition, his dwelling place, his graduated interrelations on the full scale of humanity—than the monthly Missionary Herald of the American Board. Scholars quote it, ambassadors pay tribute to its writers. Science, geography, history, study and appropriate it. These are the pages, such are the facts, that come month by month before the minds of those who attend these missionary meetings. To some extent these facts would be accessible without such attendance, in the printed periodical, but, practically, they would not be gathered. If read, they would not be made so impressive and memorable. A young man who should resolve, for his intellectual enriching alone, never to fail of attendance upon this monthly resumé of the world's getting on, might, to his advantage, accept it as a substitute for libraries and lyceums and lectures, and would, when in years, find himself possessed of a sum total of mental acquisitions, which

no pecuniary value could measure. No young man who desires any breadth of intelligence concerning the day in which he lives, and his contemporaries of the great common family, can afford to neglect this one source of intellectual training and furnishing.

But it is more vital to the idea of Christian culture to say that nowhere else can you obtain such vivid conception of the depth of man's moral and spiritual ruin. Human nature is the same with all the races, and in every land and clime. But we see it, at home, under the ameliorating power and the decent restraints of the Christian faith. Take away these restraints, go before this renovating power, where the dawn of this traveling day of light and order has not yet risen. Oh how deep and total the darkness! What forms are moving about in it! What scenes are veiled in it! What degradation is there! Follow the missionary's torch as he lights up dimly the revolting reality. What faces are there! Are they human? Is that the mouth made to smile with sweet and gentle affections? Is that the brow piled as the throne of thought? Are those the eyes filled with the light of intelligence? Look upon the retreat where that life kennels, translate its speech, trace out the rudimental family relation. Speak to them such words as virtue, goodness, purity, benevolence, truth. Verily you are talking in an unknown tongue. Are these our fellow men, children of our own ancestors? Alas, what has sin wrought? This is the world that has departed from God. This is what God saw, and loved. This is what Jesus saw, and died. Can any of us see it and think sin a little thing? Can any of us see it and doubt the doctrine of man's depravity? Can any of us look upon it habitually and not appreciate the world's need of the Gospel? If there be in our modern Christian development a less burdensome sense of man's utterly lost and ruined condition than our fathers had, if we have come to speak pleasantly, tolerantly and hopefully of human nature as only needing a little smoothing and polishing to be acceptable to a holy God, may not this defection be traceable to a neglect of these dark exhibitions of human guilt and shame?

Here too, perhaps, as nowhere else, we learn to appreciate the power of the Gospel as a restorative system. Can it clothe these naked savages? Can it lift these dull and sensual eyes heavenward? Can it transform these brutal instincts to holy aspirations? Can it change these ferocious tempers to meekness and love? Can it lead out before these gross and debased minds, God and good angels, and all the purities and sanctities of Christian living? Can it displace the kennel with a Christian home, and establish within, the decent order and propriety of a Christian household? Can it change the wild, vile speech of those untamed lips, to words of prayer and songs of rhythmic tenderness and worship? Can it harness tyrannical and domineering idleness and improvidence to diligence and thrift, and turn the wilderness into a garden, the desert into a fruitful field? Can it lift up the swarming tribes of such human outcasts, and build them into the fair proportions of a Christian nation, and set it as a gem of light and beauty on the bosom of the deep, the loveliest thing God's eye looks upon on the broad Pacific sea? How such a view exalts the Gospel before us! How it rises and towers up—God's great work—with new sublimities of power—more kindling, inspiring, and quickening to our homage than we have ever elsewhere seen it! If we would know how much God has invested, of his wisdom and greatness, in this redemption scheme, these are the scenes in which to acquire that knowledge. No month shall pass without bringing some of these amazing triumphs of the love and grace of Jesus before us, to move our wonder and excite our adoring praise.

What other scene helps us to come into such full and tender sympathy with Christ as this? How does he feel toward our lost race? How does he look upon

these "dark places of the earth, full of the habitations of cruelty?" What are his thoughts of this vast, sunken, heathen world? Is it for us only that he died? Does he long for us and none beside? Are not his compassions waiting—waiting—waiting, till some voice speak his name in the ears of these far off ransomed ones, and some hand lead them to him for pardon and crowns of life? What is his dearest wish—what is his grandest purpose on the earth? Is it not to be known as the earth's Saviour and Lord? Can a Christian heart be in sympathy with Jesus and indifferent to missions? Can that heart enter into the feelings of that divine bosom, and prefer, on the Concert eve, to spend the hour somewhere else? Find me a place upon which the regard of the Saviour is more intensely fixed upon the first Sabbath evening of the month, than that scene where the church assembles to pray, "Thy kingdom come," and to watch and listen unto the answers to that prayer. Whither will you guide me? Shall it be where light hearts gather to be exhilarated by artistic singing? Is Jesus present there with warmer sympathies than where those prayers ascend, and the ends of the earth send in responses? Shall it be where some question of municipal polity is discussed? Shall it be where trained elocution is reciting the sentences of famed orators, for our literary entertainment? Shall it be where an indolent household circle takes negligé posture in easy chairs and on soft lounges? What other purely religious gathering even, however solemn and spiritual, can have an object so grand, so comprehensive, so near the deep core of the heart of Christ, as this that has met to take up his great commission, and to bring him his chief and long delayed joy and reward? If our personal predilections, our itching ears, our roving propensities, our thirst for outside spiritual stimulus, our desire for self-gratification, control our movements, why, we may go hither and thither as far as our vagrant feet and our more vagrant fancies shall carry us. But if sympathy with Christ marshall our steps on this one Sabbath evening, if we mean to be where he lingers with tenderest interest, and to come under the most welcoming glance of his eye and his warmest smile, can we doubt that this scene of conference and prayer concerning the evangelizing of the nations is the scene whither we should be led?

It will be acknowledged, of course, that the church owes a duty to Christian missions, and that each individual member of the church shares in that debt. What is it that is owed? A little treasure—an annual gift—an occasional utterance of the Lord's prayer, without any special emphasis on the missionary petition therein, more than we put on that for our daily bread—a glancing of the eye over the missionary column of the family religious newspaper, if such a column can be found? This cannot be all. And yet it is likely to be about the whole, if one neglect the Monthly Concert. It is, with multitudes of professing Christians living in such neglect, practically the whole. Nay, we are to meet and hear freshly, again, that great missionary command, with all the stress of Jesus' heart in it. We are to meet and send out our cheer to the faithful brethren who have gone in our place to the distant idolatrous tribes, and who look back with straining eyes to see whether they are remembered still, and how many of us come together to hear their salutations, and to waft them, in prayers, our united benedictions? We are to meet to kindle in our souls afresh the missionary ardor, to draw in a deep inspiration of the spirit of self sacrifice, and of the rescuing pity and yearning love of our Lord. The missionary life, which is, more than any other form of expression, that which embodies and conveys most of the heart of Jesus—most nearly identical with that spirit of Christ without which no man is his—cannot be vital and earnest with one who chooses to live in habitual non-attendance upon this scene of sacred missionary interest.

If there is any one scene that secures the full and symmetrical development of the Christian character, crowns and wreathes it with all its graces in full bloom and fragrance, it is still this scene of the Missionary Concert. Here is height, for we go up to the throned heart of Jesus. Here is depth, for we gauge the abyss of man's ruin. Here are length and breadth, for our thoughts and sympathies and prayers run swiftly from pole to pole of the habitable earth, and wrap the globe around, like the tidal wave of its oceans. Here Christian pity is taught to weep her softest tears. Here Christian endurance faces its sharpest conflicts, its heaviest strain, and Christian heroism wins its greenest laurels. Here our faith wrestles with hardest problems, and again looks upon its brightest rewards. Here we come to feel that we are nothing and less than nothing before the mountain barriers that bar the Gospel's way, and again that our faith, instrumentally, is mighty through God to the pulling down of the strongholds of error and sin. Here the love of souls becomes a consuming passion, and the longing insupportable, that our crucified Lord should see the fruit of his anguished travail and be satisfied. Here our search grows eager for the ancient promises, and we sift the Word of God to trace out that covenant of the Father that pledges to the Son the heathen world as his inheritance. Humility, patience, perseverance, self-denial, ceaseless gratitude for the things wherein we are made to differ from our benighted kindred, the spirit of importunate prayer, a discernment of, and a consecration unto, the true and noble end of Christian living, all these receive here, every month, a fresh baptism, wherein they are sprinkled from the dust of earthliness, and show a divine purity and beauty. The hold of our ambition, our greed, our craving for luxuries, our all encroaching worldliness, is relaxed; and here, if anywhere, here almost assuredly, we write upon body, soul and estate, "All for Christ." This makes a broad, vigorous, healthful Christian development. Nothing narrow, sickly and dwarfing in this experience. Here the disciple grows to his full stature. He lives not in the confining cell of his own prejudices and his selfish enjoyments. He lives in the wide world over which the cross-bannered host of God's elect is marching, beneath the open sky where the shadowing wings of the missionary angel bear on that glad heraldry, calling down through the airy spaces, "peace on earth, good will to men," and within the full circumference of that large love that bought the world with a sacrificial death.

My dear people, I do not think any of us can afford to dispense with this school of Christian nurture. I think many of us need a higher appreciation of its priceless worth. I believe there is nothing that we can do for our Christian growth, no influence under which we can sit for our personal quickening and enlarging, no service which we can render to the Master and the great scheme which he carries on his heart, in any one hour of all the month, at once so profitable to us, so fruitful for human good, so grateful to Christ, as this attendance upon the meeting for missionary intercession. Will any of you say that these meetings are not interesting! That's your mistake. They are. You cannot tell in any tone, by any utterance, from any lips, the story of the struggling and triumphing Gospel, the story of man's degradation and sinfulness and woe, the story of our Christian comrades pioneering the paths of saving truth in the far off lands of superstition and darkness, without interesting any heart in sympathy with Christ. Will you stay away because the meetings are thinly attended? Is that a remedy for that evil? The single element of a thronged house, without one other feature changed, would fill the meetings with life and power. The presence of numbers, the warmth of so many hearts beating together, the ascending clouds of intercession from so many

souls in unison, the inter-acting inspirations from so many sympathies, all drawn out in one direction, and coursing together through the changes of the meeting, would make the place as solemn and privileged as the council chamber of the Deity.

It is one evening of a month. Give it to this service. Set it apart and consecrate it, and make it sacred to this observance. Write a vow before God, in your closet, to keep this Concert. Let nothing but his peremptory hand upon you keep you away. I would have no regular engagement, of whatever sort, that should bereave me and Christ of this attendance. Come, young and old; come in fair weather and foul; come fresh or weary; come though angelic choirs give concerts in pavilions of gold, though silver-tongued orators promise strains of eloquence sweeter than song. Come, to please Jesus; to take upon your willing hearts the tender pressure of his last command; and your souls shall reap a full reward; the welcomes of your waiting Lord shall greet you and rest upon you, and the world's redemption shall be hastened on.

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